EJISDC (2001) 4, 3, 1-17

Comparing Approaches: Telecentre Evaluation Experiences in Asia and Latin America1

Katherine Reilly
Master of Public Administration
Carleton University,
Canada
Katherine@reilly.net

Ricardo Gómez
Senior Program Specialist
International Development Research Centre IDRC,
Canada
rgomez@idrc.ca

Abstract

IDRC has telecentre evaluation initiatives in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Each of these is in the process of establishing evaluation frameworks and each is adopting very different approaches. The current paper seeks to build on the outputs of IDRC's Far Hills Workshop on Telecentre Evaluation (September 1999) to explore the experiences in the two regions. These explorations will in turn contribute to IDRC's current initiative to develop a framework for ICTs evaluation.

The Far Hills Workshop, and the resulting report entitled Telecentre Evaluation: A Global Perspective*, had as objectives to explore challenges and opportunities for telecentre evaluation; understand and compare emerging evaluation frameworks and methodologies; assess needs and resources available; identify salient issues affecting telecentre performance; and provide an opportunity to exchange experiences and lessons across regions.*

Understanding Telecentres

Telecentres are a new trend in international development. Loosely defined, telecentres are a physical space that provides public access to information and communication technologies, notably the Internet, for educational, personal, social, and economic development (for a more detailed discussion on telecentre definition see Gomez, 1999). When it comes to evaluating what kind of benefit or development telecentres bring to a community, we are only beginning to scrape the surface. About six months ago IDRC's PAN and Acacia Networking initiatives organised an international meeting in Quebec, Canada, to discuss telecentre evaluation methodologies. At the meeting we established a list of criteria for telecentre evaluation (Gómez, 1999). Based on this work, we suggest the following guidelines to assess ICT evaluation that is useful, financially responsible, builds local capacity, and enables shared learning:

Guiding Principles for sound Telecentre Evaluation

Building from discussions at Global Telecentre Evaluation Meeting, Far Hills Inn, September 1999
Guiding principles to help evaluation be USEFUL, FINANCIALLY RESPONSIBLE, BUILDS

1 A draft of this paper was presented at the 50th Annual International Communication Association ICA Conference June 1-5, Acapulco, Mexico

LOCAL CAPACITY and ENABLES SHARED LEARNING:

1) Participatory	All relevant stakeholders, including users and non-users, are involved in the evaluation process.
2) Socially Inclusive	Evaluations explicitly address, include and provide differentiated information about the experiences of sub-groups in a society (gender, age, culture, religion, etc.).
3) Locally Grounded	Evaluations are context sensitive. (By way of explanation, this may imply relying on available expertise or taking into consideration local practices, world views and priorities.)
4) Public and Transparent	Evaluation results are publicized in ways appropriate to all relevant stakeholders. Evaluation processes are transparent.
5) Methodologically Appropriate	Choices of methods and tools are appropriate for the context and use, balancing replicability with usefulness and methodological robustness with practicality.
6) Sustainability Enhancing	Evaluations contribute to making telecentres more viable, to enhancing services and to making them more relevant.
7) Capacity Building	Lessons learned – both failures and successes - are documented during evaluations and are used to empower telecentre practitioners and users. Training is carried out where a need is identified.
8) Reflective of Shared Visions	Evaluations are based on a common understanding of the telecentre mission, the evaluation process, the goal of the evaluation, and how results will be used.
9) Strategically Oriented	The evaluation strategy is incorporated into the project design and reflects project objectives. It is focused on clear questions that are important to stakeholders.
10) Gender Sensitive	The evaluation strategy, process, methodology and tools are sensitive to the particular realities and needs of women. Women are consulted in the development and realization of evaluative processes.

Gomez, Ricardo and Katherine Reilly. *Comparing Approaches: Telecentre Evaluation Experiences in Asia, Africa and Latin America*. (mimeograph) July 2000.

16814835, 2001, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.1681-4835.2001.tb00026.x by Cochrane Oman, Wiley Online Library on [08/06/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

At the Far Hills meeting, several participants noted a distinction between two classes of evaluation criteria. The first is input measures, which Harris explains, "are not immediately associated with the benefits that the user community enjoy, but they are regarded as essential preconditions for those benefits to emerge. Consequently, they can be used by operators as guides for establishing telecentres and for constructing the services that they will provide" (1999). Output measures on the other hand, "relate to the achievements of the Telecentre within the community it serves. Output measures are distinguished from input measures in that they relate to the additional benefits that the community enjoys as a result of utilising the services of the centre" (Harris, 1999). Hudson makes a distinction between formative and summative functions of evaluation, the former being "feedback on the project or activity: how well is it working, what changes or improvements should be made, what was learned that could be applied in other similar projects, etc." and the later being, "Did the project achieve its goals? What was learned about how ICTs can contribute to social and economic development?" (Hudson, 1999). Formative evaluation focuses more on process and feedback, while summative evaluation seeks to discover if a difference was made by a project.

These distinctions can be somewhat artificial, however. For example, how well a project is working is inextricably linked to whether it achieves its goals. A broader basis for understanding is required to compare and examine the evaluation work being done by IDRC. This is in part the intent of the Guiding Principles. But on another dimension, it is important to understand what the purpose of any evaluation is, and for an organisation like IDRC, which works on various levels, this is key. In the case of an international donor agency, evaluations can serve different purposes.

Within IDRC, telecentre projects are often carried out in association with a recipient (often a regional body), which in turn works with various telecentre organisations. Many projects follow a three-tiered cascading structure (IDRC - recipient - telecentres), while in other cases IDRC program officers interact directly with telecentres. But, while IDRC's research is often concerned with broader policy issues and global impacts – what could be termed the "big questions" – the immediate information needs of telecentre users and operators at the local level are more specialised.[2] In an environment of limited resources, the potential exists that choices will have to be made between research that answers the big questions and research that suits local information needs. Or, to be less absolute, it may be difficult to fully reconcile the need for data that is relevant for regional studies with the need for data that is relevant locally. Thus, there is a possibility that studies executed by IDRC or a regional organisation with the assistance – and even input – of local groups, will not fully meet the needs of those local groups. Alternatively, it is possible that specialised research at the local level will not contribute fully or meaningfully to larger research questions.

Research activities which seek to answer the "big questions" are important for justifying international contributions to telecentre activities, determining regional caveats, understanding both positive and negative outcomes, discovering linkages with other development objectives, uncovering successful practices, and building capacity, among other things. The research will determine whether and how telecentre activities are carried out in the future, and, as such, it is important that these research activities have input from local groups. Evaluation cannot be viewed by primary and secondary recipients as

2 This is not to say that local organizations do not get involved in the larger questions. In fact, much of IDRC's work in the are of connectivity has focused on helping local groups contribute to regional or international exchanges.

16814835, 2001, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.1681-4835.2001.tb00026.x by Cochrane Oman, Wiley Online Library on [08/06/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

simply a condition of funding. It should be viewed as a means to influence the activities of development agencies. Evaluations are an opportunity to determine that "This is working for us, but that is not."

On the other hand, a goal of IDRC's work is also to enhance the sustainability of individual telecentres. Telecentres are a relatively new phenomenon and there exists little guidance for the individual telecentre operator on how to successfully carry out a project. Thus, evaluation is particularly important at the local level so that the telecentre operator can better understand local needs and opportunities, so that problem areas can be identified and addressed, and so that successful or unsuccessful practices can be recorded. In order for telecentre operators to realise these local evaluations, they will require training and support. It is not clear that this area is being systematically addressed - either by IDRC or by other institutions. The lack of clarity may emerge from the fact that local evaluations are folded into larger comparative or regional evaluations. Thought information from such studies may be useful to local operators, it is not sufficient. Information needs at the local level are likely more frequent, detailed and specialised then larger studies can provide. Thus, it may be necessary to develop appropriate guidelines and training for evaluation at the local telecentre level. This may be difficult given the variety of telecentre experiences and communities served. However, it is possible that much knowledge already exists in the form of business auditing techniques and management reviews. Furthermore, telecentres can provide each other with a great deal of information and support if the appropriate channels are put in place for communication.

When various levels of partnership emerge, evaluation becomes more complicated. IDRC is working on different approaches to telecentre evaluation in each of Latin America, Asia and Africa. The activities in each region are vastly different and each approach has its strengths and weaknesses. Throughout this paper, these approaches will be described and presented in light of the guiding principles to telecentre evaluation. The following chart synthesises the findings of this analysis and provides a means to compare approaches. The discussions also reflect the balance that each approach has struck between the individual needs of telecentres and the need to address larger research questions. The conclusion draws from these results to provide summary results, recommendations and future directions.

Experiences in ASIA: PANTLEG - An emerging evaluation approach

Evaluation of IDRC's Asian telecentre projects got its impetus during regional working sessions at the Far Hills workshop. At this time the PAN-Asia Telecentre Learning & Evaluation Group (PANTLEG) was established consisting of two IDRC staff, and five Asian partner organisations. The group decided to explore an innovative approach to evaluation. In order to measure the impacts of the telecentre initiatives, the group investigated the idea of collecting stories from telecentre operators and users. According to the PANLEG group:

> Stories, whilst anecdotal, offer a rich picture of the impact of ICT interventions in local, complex and dynamic social settings. They are accessible and verifiable during short visits and they acknowledge the often indirect influence that development interventions have on the behaviour of their beneficiaries. Moreover, stories as evaluation concede that the benefits of telecentre activities are often detectable only after they have been installed, contrary to traditional approaches to information systems, in which expected benefits are usually specified before the technology is installed. (PANTLEG, 1999)

16814835, 2001, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.1681-4835.2001.tb00026.x by Cochrane Oman, Wiley Online Library on [08/06/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Comparing Approaches to Telecentre Evaluation

The Evaluation Should Be:	Asia: PANTLEG	Latin America: TELELAC
1) Participatory	Great potential if local story gatherers are empowered.	Guiding philosophy is participation.
2) Socially Inclusive	Individual voices can represent a variety of groups.	To be determined.
3) Locally Grounded	Stories reflect local experiences.	Adapted to the context of the telecentre user.
4) Public and Transparent	Publication processes and level of transparency is unclear.	Highly public and transparent processes and methods of dissemination.
5) Methodologically Appropriate	Practical. Not particularly robust. Focus on successes.	Flexibility and adaptability are a challenge.
6) Sustainability Enhancing	Opportunity for learning and exchanges.	Goal is to enhance the sustainability of telecentres.
7) Capacity Building	Emphasis on celebrating success.	Capacity-building and training.
8) Reflective of Shared Visions	Unclear.	Strong collective process.
9) Strategically Oriented	Open-ended.	Methodology must be flexible to accommodate strategic goals.
10) Gender Sensitive	Includes women's voices.	Tools to be determined.

16814835, 2001, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.1681-4835.2001.tb00026.x by Cochrane Oman, Wiley Online Library on [08/06/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Because stories must be told to an evaluator, and because a major criterion for evaluation as determined by the Far Hills workshop is participation, the group also explored the idea of having the telecentres evaluate each other. Thus, neighbouring telecentres would exchange, compare and document their experiences, providing an opportunity for both primary learning in the form of telecentre capacity building, and for secondary learning in the form of evaluation capacity building. The approach has been dubbed a 'learning evaluation.'

A first exploration of this methodology has been carried out by PANTLEG. In November 1999, the group realised a mission to study the projects of two IDRC partner organisations in India. Two IDRC representatives accompanied Roger Harris of Malaysia, Merlita Opena of the Philippines and Narangerel Dander of Mongolia to visit V. Balaji of the MS Swaminathan Research Centre (MSSRF) and Loyola Joseph of the Foundation of Occupational Development (FOOD), both in Madras. This entire group of project co-ordinators visited six village telecentres, one of which acts as an information hub for three others administered by MSSRF, and one centre of operations hooked to one telecentre administered by FOOD. The group had discussions with telecentre users and operators to, "discover a range of typical stories that described instances of telecentre use which were perceived by the users to have led to successful outcomes," and to, "discover any success stories concerning operational problems, and the means that were used to overcome them" (PANTLEG, 1999). Story collection typically started with village leaders (mostly male), then users (first male and then female users) and finally operators (in one case the operators were part of a woman's co-operative). In all, the group uncovered 24 success stories, each of which, "owes its outcome to the sensitive and timely delivery of useful information that contributed to local knowledge which facilitated something desirable for the recipient" (PANTLEG, 1999).

The evaluation group summarised their thoughts for the 2 project organisers of FOOD and MSSRF. They then reviewed the impact assessment section of an MSSRF project proposal. MSSRF had proposed regular surveys of key indicators throughout their projects in order to measure improvements attributable to the telecentres. An important lesson of the exercise for the PANTLEG group was that evaluation of a telecentre project is not straightforward. They suggested that the proposal be changed so that baseline surveys were followed by story gathering and the collection of fresh empirical data, a process more akin to action research. This approach recognises that the implementation of the telecentre projects can shift the focus of the research question and generate new avenues for inquiry. Furthermore, the mix of approaches would provide a much richer picture than could come from a uniquely survey approach. Another recommendation was that MSSRF focus less on specific project outcomes which may be hard to quantify and measure. Instead, the evaluation group suggested that, "it might be beneficial to acknowledge … uncertainty of outcomes at the outset and to demonstrate the capability of the project to tease out unpredictable benefits through the skilful and sensitive application of appropriate methods such as Action Research, Participatory Rural Appraisal, Rapid Rural Appraisal and Outcome Mapping" (PANTLEG, 1999).

The mission to Asia gathered several stories indicating the positive impact that telecentres can have in underdeveloped communities. For example, in one instance, a farmer discovered late at night that if a cow didn't receive treatment within a few hours, it would likely die. PANTLEG's report explains that, "The farmer was able to summon help from the telecentre staff who searched their networked information sources for a veterinary surgeon who would was close enough to apply treatment within a short time. The surgeon was contacted by telephone and he arrived in time to save the cow"

16814835, 2001, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.1681-4835.2001.tb00026.x by Cochrane Oman, Wiley Online Library on [08/06/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

(PANTLEG, 1999).

Story gathering has many positive characteristics. It is highly focused on the individual, which provides a means to ensure social inclusion. Social groups and women have an opportunity to express their experiences in their own voice. This also makes the approach very locally grounded in that the stories will reflect the reality of the orators. As the PANTLEG group points out:

> The context of the evaluation supported the approach, by allowing individuals to express themselves freely and by focussing special attention during each session on the women beneficiaries. The Group had every reason to believe that the stories they heard were genuine and were faithfully transmitted through the translation process. However, we acknowledge that the evaluation, depending on its purpose, could in some ways be described as superficial. (PANTLEG, 1999)

Indeed, the applicability of the approach may depend on the situation. By its nature, it is flexible and easily adaptable and stories are easily accessible and verifiable, however it is not a particularly robust methodology in terms of replicability and collection of baseline data for crosscutting comparisons. Furthermore, because the approach can uncover unanticipated impacts, it could be difficult to use for certain strategic purposes. An open-ended question is much more unwieldy than a set of survey questions, which can constrain the range of answers. Stories, although useful in some contexts, may not be considered sufficiently robust by government agencies, donors or partners. For some purposes (policy development, telecentre management, economic implications), a different type of evaluation may be more appropriate.

PANTLEG has explored the possibility of using story gathering throughout a project to complement base-line empirical data gathered at the beginning of the project. Telecentres, as it was earlier pointed out, are implemented with a certain level of unpredictability: if you build it they will come - and benefit. The group asks, "is our ability to predict outcomes deficient in some way or is it more in the nature of the creativity and resourcefulness of individuals who have been empowered with access to information that we should not be expected to predict how they will conduct themselves with such new found capacities?" (PANTLEG, 1999). With telecentres the expected outcomes, as measured against project objectives or current knowledge, may not reflect the actual impacts - positive or negative. For program evaluation this is problematic as funding agents and policy makers may want a measurable impact. This suggests that learning evaluations might need to be supplemented with other kinds of data, including more quantitative information. In this case, story telling could be considered an indicator of areas that warrant more systematic research.

The need to choose an appropriate methodology underlines the importance of involving telecentre users and operators in the planning and realisation of evaluations. The users and operators will have a position on what they consider to be a methodologically correct approach and a good strategic orientation. Furthermore, by providing an opportunity for the users and operators to work out these positions, the evaluation will become more reflective of a common vision, and the capacity of the telecentre community will be enhanced. During PANTLEG's visit to India, exchanges took place at the project level in a way that allowed program implementation teams to learn from each other. The mission also allowed the program implementers and IDRC staff members to collect information in a participatory manner by working with the telecentres. However, the telecentre operators did not have an opportunity to learn

16814835, 2001, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.1681-4835.2001.tb00026.x by Cochrane Oman, Wiley Online Library on [08/06/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

from each other. It would have been interesting to foster evaluation through exchanges at the telecentre level. This would allow telecentre operators and users to exchange information on service provision and uses. Furthermore, it would make evaluations more participatory, strategic and reflective of the local vision of the telecentre community.

Before these groups can be expected to carry out effective evaluations, training will be required. Story telling requires facilitation and interviewing skills. The evaluator would not simply listen and record stories, but would also need to effectively manage the information that is uncovered. In such an open-ended process, the stories told could unearth some difficult questions for the stakeholders. In this case, the evaluator may be called on to suggest solutions to the problem or moderate disputes. The approach also requires that evaluation results be used in an appropriate manner. Stories are sometimes personal, so there should be some discussion of the ethical aspects of how the information is used. Closely related to this is the imperative that the purposes and results of the study be made public in a manner appropriate to all stakeholders.

Training on the approach would also help to overcome another potential pitfall. When two telecentres or two project co-ordination teams are brought together there is a risk that successes will be emphasised over failures, as was seen in the initial PANTLEG experiment. This particular project was operating successfully at the time of the evaluation, and as a result, the evaluation produced a list of positive outcomes. However, it should be noted that the language of the PANTLEG report on the mission to India (PANTLEG, 1999) does emphasise successes. Furthermore, two telecentres established by MSSRF had been closed and replaced by two alternative centres prior to the mission. The reasons for these closures should have been examined to bring out lessons for use in other centres. While the PANTLEG group wanted to focus on how telecentres can positively impact development, ignoring failures can lead to problems with program implementation and the sustainability of telecentres. Closely related to this experience is the concern that learning evaluations may be at risk of emphasising successes over failures because of inter-group competition, a desire to show hospitality, or incentives to gain funding or other support. An emphasis must be placed on honest sharing of information for the sake of learning.

The PANTLEG group continues to develop its approach to evaluation (PANTLEG, 2000). Since their visit to India, PANTLEG has recognised five common causes of concern in telecentre operation and use including: standards for telecentre operation, policy environments for telecentre propagation, cultural context of telecentre deployment, sharing of knowledge between PANTLEG partners, and extending capabilities to non-PANTLEG individual and organisations. In order to address these points, PANTLEG has adopted comparative evaluation and exchange of participants, among other things, as crosscutting objectives for their work. A study mission to Sarawak has been proposed to evaluate the IDRC-supported remote community telecentre research project being carried out by the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. A goal of the mission will be to further develop the evaluation methodology and to "define a pilot implementation of evaluation methodologies and techniques suitable for the Sarawak project and capable of enhancing the Group's capacity for evaluating telecentre activities" (PANTLEG, 2000). They are also working towards developing adaptable and replicable learning evaluation methods that could eventually become part of a training program.

PANTLEG in Light of the Guiding Principles for Telecentre Evaluation

16814835, 2001, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.1681-4835.2001.tb00026.x by Cochrane Oman, Wiley Online Library on [08/06/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

1. **Participatory -** The PANTLEG approach raises a question as to the focus of the evaluation and choice of evaluator. Story collection was carried out by project leaders and researchers rather than telecentre operators and users. In order to be fully participatory the approach should empower telecentres, in addition to project co-ordinators, to carry out evaluations and include them in their planning processes.

2. **Socially Inclusive -** PANLEG was aware of the need to be socially inclusive in the gathering of stories and made an effort to speak to various groups. By focusing on the individual, the approach provides a way to portray the experiences of various groups within a community - as long as all voices have an opportunity to be heard.

3. **Locally Grounded -** This approach is very locally grounded in that it seeks the views of local telecentre operators and users on the impacts of the technology and the centre. The stories gathered will reflect the local experiences and attitudes towards the telecentre and uncover local distinctions and needs.

4. **Public and Transparent -** PANLEG listened to stories in a public forum which makes the research process somewhat transparent. It is not clear, however, if the purpose, implications and results of the evaluation were made public to the study groups.

5. **Methodologically Appropriate -** The applicability of this approach may depend on the situation. By its nature, it is flexible and easily adaptable however group facilitation and interviewing skills are required which may make it inappropriate for certain groups. It is a very practical approach in that stories are easily accessible and verifiable, however it is not a particularly robust methodology. There is a risk that survey groups will emphasise successes over failures in exchanges with other groups because of inter-group competition, a desire to show hospitality, or incentives to gain funding or other support. An emphasis needs to be placed on honest sharing for the sake of learning. Also, PANTLEG has explored the possibility of using story gathering throughout the project to complement base-line empirical data gathered at the beginning of the project.

6. **Sustainability Enhancing -** This approach is very applicable to the promotion of quality and sustainability in that it provides an opportunity for learning exchanges and incremental improvement. However, this will require that telecentre operators, in addition to project co-ordinators, are trained on evaluation techniques. Also, telecentre operators and users would benefit from the exchange of experiences, successes and failures, solutions, and plans.

7. **Capacity Building -** PANTLEG is still working on developing adaptable and replicable learning evaluation methods that could translate into a training program. Information exchanges build capacity both in terms of contributions to project and telecentre advances, and also in terms of evaluation capacity building. Serious reflection on the failures and successes of users and operators is empowering however, this goal would be further realised if telecentre operators were trained to carry out evaluations. PANTLEG should also put more emphasis on the often difficult task of understanding failures so that they can be avoided in the future.

8. **Reflective of Shared Visions -** With reference to points 1 and 5, there remain questions around the interaction of telecentres, project co-ordination groups, and donors in the realisation of

16814835, 2001, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.1681-4835.2001.tb00026.x by Cochrane Oman, Wiley Online Library on [08/06/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

the PANTLEG evaluations. It is not clear that telecentre user and operators have played a role in planning the evaluations. Also, stories are sometimes personal, so there needs to be some reflection on the ethical aspects of how the information is used.

9. **Strategically Oriented** - Because this approach, in part, seeks to uncover unanticipated impacts, it could uncover information that challenges stakeholders. Storytellers may have their own agendas and thus the evaluator(s) cannot necessarily control the strategic orientation of the evaluation. An open-ended question is much more unwieldy than a set of survey questions, which can constrain the range of answers. Thus, this approach may be difficult to harness for strategic purposes. Stories can provide rich information on telecentre impacts, but may not be considered sufficiently robust by government agencies, donors or partners. For some purposes (policy development, telecentre management, economic implications), a different type of evaluation may be more appropriate.

10. **Gender Sensitive** - It is important that women's voices are heard during the story collection process. When this is done, this approach allows women to express experiences without constraint. In turn stories can demonstrate how women are experiencing the telecentre.

Experiences in Latin America: TELELAC - Exploring Evaluation Collectively

IDRC's involvement with telecentre evaluation in the Latin American and Caribbean context has increasingly focused on its support of the *Telecentre Evaluation Network in Latin America and the Caribbean Project* also known as *TELELAC* (http://www.idrc.ca/pan/projects_e.htm#latinamerica) in addition to a small number of pilot telecentre implementation projects[3]. This project, which is being implemented by the Fundación ChasquiNet (http://www.chasquinet.org) of Ecuador, aims to support the development and strengthening of local, national and regional telecentres initiatives in Latin America and the Caribbean. The project's goals emerged out of a process that started with a survey and study conducted by IDRC staff followed by a discussion on the needs and expectations of telecentre operators and researchers on an electronic mailing list (January - September, 1999). From this process it was determined that telecentre monitoring and evaluation is not strong in the region and in particular that:

- Monitoring was often regarded as a project closure activity;
- Monitoring during projects was mostly used as a means to correct errors or introduce efficiencies;
- Evaluations have been either part of needs identification exercises, or carried out by external parties;
- There was a need for a regional forum to communicating experiences, review methodologies, publicise results, and articulate regional and local dynamics. (Chasquinet, 2000b)

Thus the major question faced by the TELELAC group was how to go about developing a collective evaluation process so that telecentres in the region could learn from each other through their experiences. The project's activities were elaborated first at the Far Hills meeting, and then during a planning meeting held in Papallacta, Ecuador in March, 2000 that included members of Chasquinet and

3 Other telecentre projects in Latin America currently include Telecentres, Citizenship and Municipal Governance in Mexico, InforCauca Community Telecentres in Colombia, and Ashaninka - Internet by Radio for Indigenous Communities (Capacity Development for Internet use in Latin America and the Caribbean - LAC) in Peru.

16814835, 2001, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.1681-4835.2001.tb00026.x by Cochrane Oman, Wiley Online Library on [08/06/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

other organisations which are actively involved in the project. The project is pursuing three main activities:

1) **research**, analysis, diagnostics, documentation and creation of materials to be used by telecentre in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as collection of historical telecentre experiences;
2) the development of a **collective space for hands on learning** which will offer tools and services to strengthen telecentres; and
3) an opportunity to develop, experiment and share a set of methods, techniques, and instruments for **monitoring and evaluating** the work of telecentres (Chasquinet, 2000a).

Main goals of the project are to establish strategic alliances with selected beneficiary groups (especially marginalised groups), build user capacity, and train community facilitators. The philosophy of the project is based on democracy of access and knowledge, solidarity and mutual support, participation and transparency, proactive participation, and respect of diversity and gender equity.

A set of guidelines was established at the Papallacta meeting to determine what level of participation would be necessary and acceptable for each component of the project (Chasquinet, 2000b). There is a co-ordination team consisting of Chasquinet members responsible for defining the structure and overseeing the implementation of the project. The 5-member assessment committee is made of up representatives of interested organisations and is responsible for ensuring that the goals of the project are met to the satisfaction of the members of TELELAC. The operational team consists of Chasquinet members as well as other interested parties and is responsible for the implementation of the project. All activities are to be carried out with reference to the TELELAC network through a project electronic mailing list and the existing TELELAC electronic mailing list. Each group or team also has a dedicated electronic mailing list to facilitate internal communication.

The **research** component includes a quantitative inventory and qualitative analysis of telecentre initiatives in the region, and research to determine the "state of the art" in telecentre operations. Materials are being developed for use by telecentres with emphasis on collecting and documenting telecentre histories and experiences. The project is also stressing the importance of articulating local and regional dynamics given the close relationship between communities and telecentre operations. Two major research themes within this activity are to determine ways to adapt new technologies for communities with limited means, and to examine methods for diverse groups to influence telecommunications policy.

The second main project activity is the development of an online **telecentre resource clearinghouse** (located at http://www.tele-centros.org) which will be used to strengthen collaborative work and exchange information. It will include a resource centre and toolkit with information and instructional materials relevant to telecentre operators and users.

Finally the **evaluation component** will draw on the research component, as well as other investigations, to develop methodologies and techniques for monitoring and evaluating the work of telecentres. These materials will become part of the online toolkit. It is hoped that the monitoring and evaluation techniques will help operators and users to create a sustainable and meaningful telecentre institution. The methodology chosen for these activities is highly participatory focusing on:

- learning through practice;

16814835, 2001, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.1681-4835.2001.tb00026.x by Cochrane Oman, Wiley Online Library on [08/06/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

- using a multidisciplinary team for the development of tools involving, "grassroots communities, operators and promoters of telecentres working directly with grassroots groups, researchers and academics who are using these technologies,"; and
- documenting and systematising the experiences of these groups to facilitate their dissemination and use. (ChasquiNet, 2000b)

For the TELELAC group the development of monitoring and evaluation methodologies and techniques follows a transparent and participatory process of research and development. A major strategy is to focus on common priorities for monitoring and evaluation as determined through a collaborative and collective process of online discussions. The evaluation tools developed cover diagnostic tools, planning, management, and operations. The first step is to identify, analyse and adapt existing telecentre evaluation materials, with special attention to social, economic, cultural and gender parameters. This process is being complemented by the collection of existing telecentre evaluation results. An analytical framework and evaluation methodology will then be drafted, and revised after discussion with the TELELAC group.

A 3-day workshop will be held to train a multi-disciplinary team of facilitators. These individuals will then undertake 3 pilot evaluations to test and refine the methodology, materials and instruments developed. A major goal of the pilot tests is to examine the adaptability and flexibility of the methodology to meet the specific needs of each pilot telecentre. Finally, a telecentre evaluation resource kit will be prepared and shared using the Tele-Centros site. This will include a monitoring system, an evaluation guide, and a training module for evaluation facilitators. The kit will also include a pool of evaluation experts, a continually updated set of lessons learned, bibliographies, and examples of methods and models used in various telecentres.

The development of the project plan has been completed but according to Michel Menou (2000), one of the researchers participating in the project, work has yet to commence on the monitoring and evaluation methodologies. In analysing the TELELAC project, it is important to remember the following two points. 1) The TELELAC project is working on the development of a telecentre evaluation methodology, and not the evaluation of telecentres as such (except in the three pilot studies). And 2), The shape of the evaluation methodology to be developed cannot be predicted, especially since it is to be developed through a participatory process. On the other hand, the development process and philosophy is likely to be reflected in the final product. In Menou's view, the evaluation methodology to be developed should ensure that,

> The communities (groups of stakeholders) who are going to use/benefit from the telecentre should identify the expected social changes, specify how they can be observed, and validate the observations. They should appoint representatives to a Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) committee which will assist the telecentre operators. Panels and group meetings should be implemented at regular (quarterly) intervals in order to discuss what is happening in relation to "key problems" illustrating the expected changes. External back up will be provided as appropriate and feasible, but most of the M&E should be carried out from within the stakeholders communities whose representatives should be trained for that purpose, together with telecentre operators. (Menou, 2000)

Menou also envisions telecentre evaluation to focus on enhancing the effectiveness of the operation at the telecentre level; he sees telecentre evaluation as feeding into wider project evaluations. Finally, he

16814835, 2001, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.1681-4835.2001.tb00026.x by Cochrane Oman, Wiley Online Library on [08/06/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

also points out that gender considerations will be a part of all phases of the project. According to Menou, "If designation of committee members or "key informants" does not secure fair representation of a particular group, or women, this would need to be corrected, possibly by duplicating relevant parts of the M&E with ad hoc panels. Whenever the special issues under review so require, women should be involved separately" (2000).

This participatory approach can produce rich information and provides an opportunity for the people involved in the process to determine the research methodology. In this project, evaluation has meant trying to figure out where things are at; it is a process of "ubicación" (localisation). It is of particular note that this process is focused on the telecentre level and will allow telecentre users and operators to take ownership of developing and administering the evaluation process. Will the participatory forums undertaken by TELELAC translate into a viable approach to evaluation and locally and regionally applicable results?

Another question surrounds the application of the methodology by telecentre users and operators. Based on the philosophy of the project and the attitudes of it researchers, we can predict that the resulting methodology will be convergent with the 10 Guidelines for Telecentre Evaluation. However, in the end, the strength of the approach will depend on how it is applied by telecentre users and operators. On the one hand, the existence of the Tele-Centros virtual community will help to ensure that this is done effectively at the telecentre level, and that experiences are shared at the regional level. But, the project will need to provide adequate training and documentation on the approach. In particular, since a goal of the methodology should be responsiveness to strategic orientations and local distinctions, information and training will need to be provided to advise the development of evaluation plans. The evaluation toolkit should also include complementary information to ensure its proper and effective application. This should cover participation, social inclusion, transparency, and gender. This information should ultimately contribute to an evaluation that is methodologically appropriate, reflective of shared visions, sustainability enhancing, and strategically oriented.

Setting these concerns aside, the TELELAC approach has many merits. It is transparent and participatory, locally grounded, highly public, facilitates sustainability, and is supportive of capacity building efforts. This collective process will culminate in a collective result. By providing an opportunity for participation and capacity building at the telecentre and partner levels, the project is developing capacity for evaluation which will result in better local information and data for use in broader studies. Furthermore, this process of discovery will help the telecentre community to take ownership of the evaluation and research processes. The questions being asked are justifiable, but the results of the TELELAC project will be watched with interest.

TELELAC in Light of the Guiding Principles for Telecentre Evaluation

1. **Participatory** - The process for developing the TELELAC evaluation methodology is participatory and a criterion for the implementation of the project is that it be transparent and participatory. While it does not necessarily follow that the resulting methodology will be participatory, there is a strong indication - based on project philosophy, and on discussions with project members - that this will be a major consideration.

2. **Socially Inclusive** - Until the actual methodology is developed it is difficult to judge whether it will

16814835, 2001, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.1681-4835.2001.tb00026.x by Cochrane Oman, Wiley Online Library on [08/06/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

be socially inclusive, but once again, based on the project philosophy and interviews, it appears that this will be the case. It will also depend on how the methodology is applied by the individual telecentres, however the existence of the Tele-Centros network could help ensure that this goal is met.

3. **Locally Grounded** - TELELAC aims to develop an evaluation methodology that can be adapted to the context of the telecentre user. It will be challenging to develop a tool that will allow for aggregation or comparison of regional data, that is also flexible enough to accommodate local contexts, needs, visions and strategies.

4. **Public and Transparent** - The process for developing the evaluation methodology is highly public and transparent. All materials will be posted on the tele-centros website. However, once again, alignment with this criterion will be difficult to judge until the methodology is developed and will depend on independent applications. The Tele-Centros website will provide a means for telecentre groups to share their evaluation experiences and results.

5. **Methodologically Appropriate** - The development of a methodologically appropriate framework is the main goal of the evaluation portion of the TELELAC project. A major challenge will be to create a methodology that is flexible and adaptable to the specific needs of each telecentre, yet still provides a basis for regional comparisons.

6. **Sustainability Enhancing** - It is the intention of the TELELAC project to enhance the sustainability of telecentres. This will be done by developing evaluation capacity through the establishment of appropriate methodologies and training, and fostering learning through the Tele-Centros virtual space.

7. **Capacity Building** - Not only is the TELELAC project a capacity building exercise as such, but it will result in a set of resources and training exercises that will build that capacity of the participants in the project. Furthermore, the tele-centros virtual space will provide resources that will allow tele-centre practitioners and users to develop their capacity to more effectively use and operate telecentres. It will also provide a space for telecentre operators and users to exchange lessons learned.

8. **Reflective of Shared Visions** - The development of the TELELAC evaluation methodology is highly reflective of shared visions based on the results of surveys and group discussions. According to Menou's views, the methodology to be established should also support this type of process, however, once again this is yet to be determined.

9. **Strategically Oriented** - The methodology developed must be flexible enough to be applied towards various ends. It will need to provide information for users and the community, for management, for outside agencies etc. Strategic orientation will depend on how the methodology gets applied and this should be taken into consideration in presentations of, or training on the material. The pros and cons of the methodology should be highlighted and situation-based alternatives should be provided.

10. **Gender Sensitive** - Gender issues are being taken into consideration by the project team. Once

16814835, 2001, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.1681-4835.2001.tb00026.x by Cochrane Oman, Wiley Online Library on [08/06/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

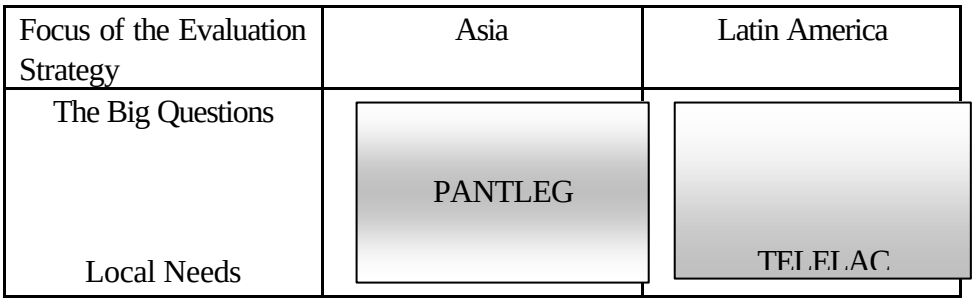
again, the gender sensitivity of the evaluation technique to be developed is yet to be seen, but current indications are that the criteria will be incorporated. It may be necessary to provide gender sensitivity training in order to ensure that the criterion is properly applied at the telecentre level.

Conclusions

By comparing the approaches to evaluation being developed by IDRC projects in, Asia and Latin America against the Guidelines for Telecentre Evaluation we can see several regional and institutional differences. PANTLEG is highly focused on the individual and on people, making the approach participatory, socially inclusive, locally grounded and sensitive to gender concerns. TELELAC has focused on the need to develop collective processes for fostering capacity and sustainability, and on dissemination strategies.

There are common threads that can be drawn from the experiences. Reflecting on the discussion of evaluation purposes presented in the introduction, this paper constitutes evaluation of the evaluation system, or meta-evaluation. Meta-evaluation can be a part of the ongoing process of the regional experiences as they work to develop their approach, methodologies and tools. In both cases, the development of methodologies and tools is an ongoing process with PANTLEG working on story-telling techniques, TELELAC focusing on collective discussions of appropriate tools. Training goes hand in hand with the development of an approach and again, this was an issue in both cases. PANTLEG will need to provide facilitation training for telecentre operators, and TELELAC should prove training materials to accompany its online tool kit in order to ensure that tools are properly implemented. Finally, both approaches share a need to disseminate results. In the case of TELELAC, dissemination channels have been established, but in the other case, strategies are weak in this area.

Both approaches have provided an opportunity to reflect on the purpose of evaluations in the context of telecentres and the role of donor agencies in facilitating them. The figure below compares the main focus of the evaluation strategy in each of the cases. PANTLEG has focused on collecting data from individual telecentres, with participation of both program officers and telecentre users and staff. However, to date, recipients and IDRC staff have used this information, not individual telecentres. TELELAC is working on developing a methodology and communication strategy to facilitate evaluations at the local level, primarily for the benefit of telecentre operators and users. However, the project's online data gathering and communications strategies will provide a means to gather information of use for bigger research questions.



Evaluations have both academic and more practical drivers and this is particularly true of the new field of telecentre evaluation. Donors have a responsibility not only to support the useful and financially

16814835, 2001, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.1681-4835.2001.tb00026.x by Cochrane Oman, Wiley Online Library on [08/06/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

responsible realisation of telecentre projects, but they also have a role to play in analysing and theorising on the impact of telecentres. We need to recognise that this is an inherently political task. As Menou points out, "Policy and decision makers who are approving or supporting programs for the development of the Internet, would like to have some sort of evidence in support of the claims by the proponents of themselves that it will bring about all the said benefits" (Menou, 1999). While research on telecentres is being done by way of evaluation, it is important to remember that the methodologies we use play a role in the research results. People have a right to have a voice in the results of telecentre evaluations because the research generated will determine the future direction of telecentre activities.

But at the same time, it is important to remember that individual telecentres have specialized needs and will require training and support to carry out local, specialized evaluations. Local research programs are also important for the identification of best practices and impacts. Their findings should be incorporated into the objectives of programs in the region to be reflected in future program evaluations. To facilitate this type of research, IDRC and its partners need to develop guidelines or techniques for local small-scale evaluation that are easy to implement at a low cost, and champion their application in telecentres through program work. Better local information can not only facilitate better project results, but can also provide a basis for better program evaluations and research. Finally, IDRC should contribute to the use of evaluation approaches that facilitate the participation of partners and telecentres in the research process so that they have a role in determining the parameters of their work.

This analysis of IDRC telecentre evaluation experiences in Asia, and Latin America has demonstrated the usefulness of the Guidelines for Telecentre Evaluation as they provide a common framework for assessing each experience. The guidelines can be used to assess other telecentre experiences and allow us to determine if telecentre evaluation is being useful, financially responsible, if it is building local capacity and enabling lesson sharing. IDRC is also using the guidelines as a starting point as it works towards developing a centre-wide framework for ICT evaluation.

References

ChasquiNet. (2000a). *Proyecto Telelac: Lecciones Aprendidas por los Telecentros y Fortalecimiento de sus Acciones al Servicio de la Sociedad Civil*, [Website]. ChasquiNet. Available: http://www.tele-centros.org/proyecto [2000, May 4].

ChasquiNet. (2000b). Bienvenidos al Proyecto Telelac, [Website]. ChasquiNet. Available: http://www.chasquinet.org/telelac [2000/06/05].

ChasquiNet. (2000c) *Informe de la Reunión del Proyecto Telelac*, Papallacta, Ecuador, May 26-30, 2000.

Gomez, R., P. Hunt, and E. Lamoureaux. (1999). "Telecentre Evaluation and Research: a global perspective." *Telecentre Evaluation: A Global Perspective (Report of an International Meeting on Telecentre Evaluation)*. Gómez and Hunt eds. Far Hills Inn, Quebec, Canada, September 28-30, 1999.

Gómez, R. and Patrick Hunt (1999). *Guiding Principles of Telecentre Evaluation.* Paper

16814835, 2001, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.1681-4835.2001.tb00026.x by Cochrane Oman, Wiley Online Library on [08/06/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

presented at the Telecentre Evaluation: A Global Perspective, Far Hills Inn, Quebec, Canada.

Graham, M. (1997) "Use of Information and Communication Technologies in IDRC Project: Lessons Learned." *IDRC Website*, April 1997, URL: http://www.idrc.ca/acacia/outputs/op-eval.htm, visited 2000/05/024.

Harris, R. "Evaluating Telecentres within National Policies for ICTs in Developing Countries." *Telecentre Evaluation: A Global Perspective (Report of an International Meeting on Telecentre Evaluation)*. Gómez and Hunt eds. Far Hills Inn, Quebec, Canada, September 28-30, 1999.

Hudson, H. "Designing Research for Telecentre Evaluation." *Telecentre Evaluation: A Global Perspective (Report of an International Meeting on Telecentre Evaluation)*. Gómez and Hunt eds. Far Hills Inn, Quebec, Canada, September 28-30, 1999.

Menou, M. "Impact of the Internet: some conceptual and methodological issues, or how to hit a moving target behind the smoke screen." *Telecentre Evaluation: A Global Perspective (Report of an International Meeting on Telecentre Evaluation)*. Gómez and Hunt eds. Far Hills Inn, Quebec, Canada, September 28-30, 1999.

Menou, M. Email Correspondence, 2000/06/21.

PANTLEG. (2000) "An agreement for joint activities to further the PANAsia programme for telecentres." (draft) PANTLEG, 2000/06/23.

PANTLEG. (1999) "Success Stories of Rural ICTs in A Developing Country." *IDRC Website*, URL: http://www.idrc.ca/pan/telsuccstories_e.htm, visited 2000/05/02.

16814835, 2001, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.1681-4835.2001.tb00026.x by Cochrane Oman, Wiley Online Library on [08/06/2023]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License